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Blowouts, Bricks, and Lines

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Abstract

This essay shares the interdisciplinary insights from three projects

Author/Artist Bio

My approach to both making art and teaching embraces multiple mediums, various mindsets and diverse inspirations. I work from a place of intuition and contemplation – equally trusting my guts and my thoughts. I am just as likely to draw inspiration from something I drove by, saw on television, heard in a song, or studied/ lectured on. I make photographs, videos, collages, sculptures, sounds, drawings, performances and text based works, and have had the opportunity to exhibit nationally and internationally at diverse venues, from artist run galleries to major museums. I have taken part in residencies in Austria, Ireland, and the US, and have received awards from the Tiffany Foundation and Artadia. My teaching is as important to me as my studio work. I was formerly the chair of the photography department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and am currently the Michael G. and C. Jane Wilson Chair in the Arts and Humanities at Harvey Mudd College. I have an MFA from the University of Illinois at Chicago. I also studied at the University of California at Santa Barbara and have a BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. I surf, run marathons, am a husband to an incredible artist, a father to an amazing daughter, and a friend to many. These are as important to my art making, teaching and life as anything else. <http://www.kenfandell.com>
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Keywords

art, art making, environment, physical objects, spaces, shapes, observation

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Blowouts, Bricks, and Lines

Kenneth Fandell

They turn up during a long drive on any highway. Below the traffic, not at regular intervals, but frequently enough, blown out tires. What once were machine shaped perfect geometric circular bands of rubber are now dark entropically ripped and twisted irregular forms. They lounge expressively on the light grey concrete.

Blowouts are also known as road gators. The tread of the shredded tire looks like an alligators back. And they are a dangerous threat to vehicles. According to one popular insurance company “a road gator’s bite can surpass that of its namesake, slicing open oil pans, ripping off steering components, smashing through windshields and causing panicked drivers to swerve themselves into a crash, attempting to avoid the beasts” (Demere, 2014, para.3).

Franz Kline’s shapes and lines have a similar spontaneous gestural appearance to the forms of road gators as they are arbitrarily blown around the pavement. Kline’s paintings are works of labored framing, positioning and mark making though. Kline’s monumental paintings, with large bold brush strokes (made up of a multitude of smaller ones) are frequently enlargements of small drawings and studies. These small works were created by a continuous change of “arrangements and proportions” (DeKooning, 1994). By then projecting these small works and producing them in a way that looks expressive, Kline was essentially “fusing the improvised and the deliberate” (Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), 2017, para. 1).



Blowouts

Perhaps most things are amalgamations of the unplanned and the intended. A grid can be just as expressive as freehand line. A brick wall can reveal much about its cultural and individual origins. Roman bricklayers would often embellish their work with “expressive decoration, tiny flourishes... to cover over an imperfect joint” or errors in planning. These embellishments can be read as a form of maker’s marks delivering the declaration “I exist” from the craftsmen that laid the bricks (Sennett, 2008).

A single brick holds the potential of a multitude of expressions. Drawing on its role in the modular construction of sturdy walls it stands for persistence and strength. When used as a projectile it can cause immediate and satisfying destruction as a declaration of displeasure.¹ Because of its utilitarian origins, ubiquity and ease with which it can be repurposed as a weapon, it is an apt symbol of revolution. Shooting a basketball and clanging the ball hard off the rim is called throwing up a brick. When your phone won’t turn on in any way shape or form, rendering it useless for communication, it is referred to as being bricked.

The act of building a brick wall is a methodical one. Before construction starts, preparations include measurements and counting. The size of the wall needs to be determined. The number of bricks required needs to be determined. That number needs to be determined by the size of bricks (standard modular bricks are 3-5/8" wide, 2-1/4" tall, and 7-5/8" long) and the thickness of the mortar needed to hold the bricks together (usually 1/2"). The courses, or rows, of bricks should be staggered to add strength. This means a half brick on each course needs to be accounted for (wikiHow, 2017).

¹ My other often threatened to throw a brick threw the television if there was something on she didn’t approve of. My father often talked about throwing a brick threw the television when the Chicago Bulls lost to the Golden State Warriors in the 1975 NBA Western Conference Finals.



Bricks

Counting can be seen as tedious. More things to keep track of. More abstractions removed from the flow of a physical present. But counting is part of meditative practice. Counting breaths to ten, and then starting over again, is a first step of cultivating mindfulness and focusing consciousness on the present.

The lines made by the trunks of palm trees against the June gloom skies of Southern California look like counting hash marks. There is no exact count of these ornamental trees in Los Angeles though. Trying to count them all would be a Sisyphean task. They have been planted here since the 1700s. In the 20th century they were planted at an alarming rate. According to public records, in 1931 25,000 of them were planted as part of a public works project. But although they seem infinite, their number is finite and becoming increasingly comprehensible. Most of these trees are nearing the end of their natural life spans and probably will not be replaced (Masters, 2011).

A beginning exercise in learning composition is to start with a square and a line. The task is to create different compositions exploring how the placement of that one line, parallel to the edges of the square (either vertical or horizontal), in that set field, can create dramatically different compositions. Once ten compositions have been generated, compositional iterations with two lines, three lines, four lines, etc.... are to be created.

The process of seriality present in this exercise is key to understanding the arc of Agnes Martin's work and how she "spread meaning over the perception of a body of work, rather than locating it in a single image." For Martin this meant that as her work progressed "effort and intensity previously compressed into a single image, providing the viewer a sublime moment, now would unfold as a sequential experience within infinite potential, as the viewer sees multiple renditions of a similar idea in time and space" (Bell, 2015, p.29).

A hallucinatory image of an adobe brick was enough to disrupt Agnes Martin's practice and convince her to leave New York. She loaded up her pickup and went for a long drive. She wound up in New Mexico. Once there she did not make art. She made adobe bricks. She built three structures with these bricks. The last structure she built was her studio (Weber, 2009).



Palm Lines

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